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None

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(54) Method for producing indicia on diamonds

(57) In order to produce a mark on a diamond 15 a region on the surface of the diamond which is to be marked is irradiated with an argon/fluorine or other excimer laser 11 whose output beam is passed through a mask 23 which defines the mark. The diamond selectively absorbs the excimer laser radiation and undergoes a partial allotropic transformation without losing its diamond crystal lattice configuration. The method may also be used to cut a hole through a diamond eg to produce an extrusion die.

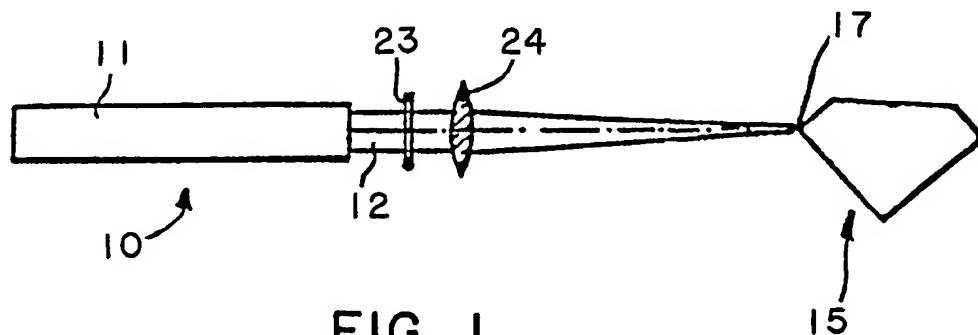


FIG. 1

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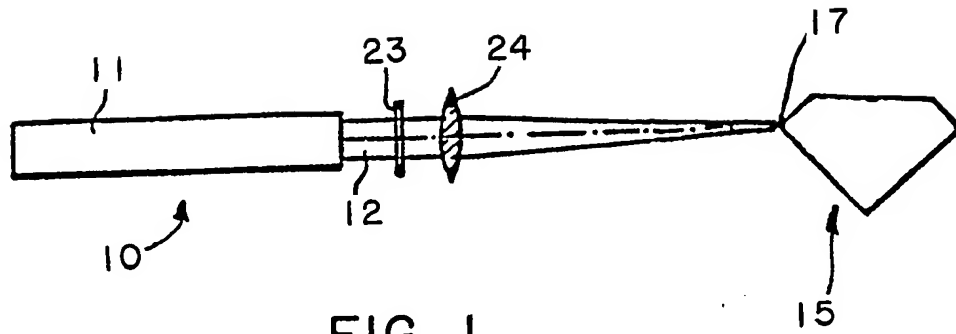


FIG. 1

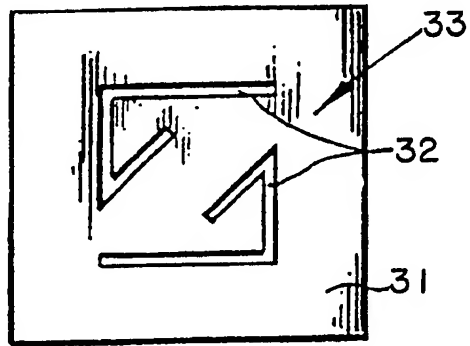


FIG. 2

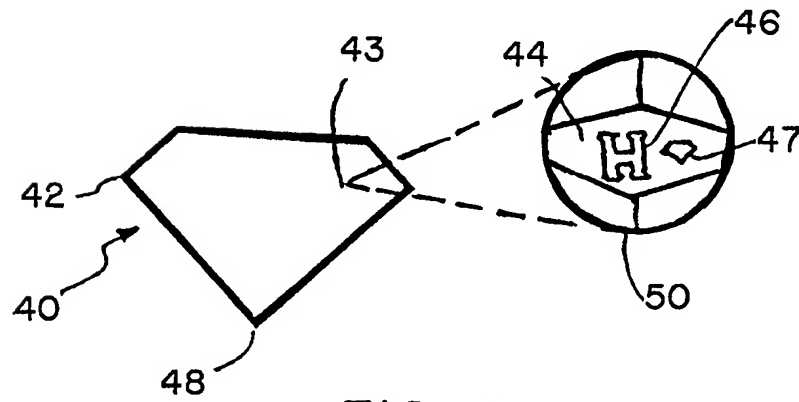


FIG. 3

- 1 -

METHODS FOR PRODUCING INDICIA ON DIAMONDS

5 This invention relates to methods for producing indicia on diamonds; it particularly relates to the creation of identification marks or visible or invisible (but detectable) indicia on diamonds, for the purposes of quality control, consumer brand identification, security or any other purpose requiring identification of a stone.

10 Luxury and consumer goods alike are often provided with an identifying mark from which the source of the goods can be identified. This is especially important in the case of a product whose quality and value can only be determined by specially skilled workers. Such
15 identifying marks must be on the goods in a permanent form. On the other hand, the indicia should not impair the value of goods in any way.

20 In the case of precious stones such as diamonds, there has long been a need for a reliable method by which the identity of a stone could be uniquely determined. Such a method would aid in locating and recovering specific pieces of lost or stolen jewellery. Furthermore, where diamonds are loaned on a temporary basis, as is not

uncommon, permanent indicia on the stone would facilitate ensuring that the returned stone is the loaned stone.

5 In addition, such detection systems or indicia could serve to indicate the level of quality or craftsmanship of the faceting, cutting and polishing of the stone. In essence, a permanent mark or detectible indicium on a diamond may serve as a hallmark or trade mark in much the usual fashion, i.e., as an identification of source.
10 Such a mark may be employed in dispelling the common misunderstanding that diamonds are essentially fungible, for any given weight, colour and clarity. In fact, the quality of the gemstone may be markedly affected by the skill and care of the stoneworker in the selection,
15 sawing, girdling, cutting and polishing processes.

There have been devised a number of processes for marking diamonds, such as are disclosed in US 4 467 172 and 4 392 476. In each of these patents, lasers are disclosed for
20 creating focused spots of laser energy on or in the diamond to be marked, wherein the desired indicia are formed by creating series or patterns of dots with such focused spots of energy.

25 The aforementioned laser marking systems employ YAG or Nd:YAG lasers operating at 1.06 μm wavelength, alone or in conjunction with frequency doublers. Thus the disclosed laser radiation indicent on the diamond is at either 1.06 or 0.532 μm wavelength. As recognised in US
30 4 467 172, laser energy at 0.532 μm wavelength can penetrate the surface of a diamond and can heat and vaporise portions of material below, as well as at, the diamond surface. This penetration of energy is undesirable and poses undue risks of fracturing the stone

as a result of internal heating of the crystal structure.
The prior art systems thus include complex arrangements
to control precisely the amount of laser energy delivered
so as to prevent damage to the diamonds being thus
5 marked.

In addition, because diamond is substantially transparent
or transmissive at the aforementioned wavelengths, such
prior diamond marking processes generally involve the
10 application of energy-absorbing coatings such as carbon
black to the surface to be marked, further complicating
the procedure.

Moreover, since the indicia are formed by multiple spots,
15 complex and expensive computer-driven coördinate tables
are provided in the aforementioned prior art systems for
accurately positioning the diamond with respect to the
focused spot of laser energy to be next applied. The
need to create numerous spots to form a single mark
20 further causes the prior art marking processes to be
relatively slow in operation.

According to the present invention there is provided a
method for producing a marking on a diamond, the method
25 comprising the steps:
positioning a mask between an output of an excimer laser
and a portion of a surface of the diamond to be marked;
and
directly irradiating the portion of the surface of the
30 diamond with the excimer laser through the mask so as to
permit the radiation of the excimer laser itself to
create the mark in a pattern defined by the mask.

In a preferred embodiment, the excimer laser irradiates

the diamond with at least one energy pulse at a wavelength of about 193 nm.

5 In a first aspect of the present invention the mask positioned between the excimer laser and the diamond to be marked through which the laser radiation is to pass may be spaced from the diamond, or may be placed directly on to or adjacent to the diamond.

10 There may be additionally included means for optically reducing the size of the mark pattern on the diamond.

The excimer laser is in the preferred embodiment adjusted to remove a layer from the surface of a thickness in the
15 range of several nm to several μm .

In a second aspect of the present invention a coating of material is applied to the surface to be marked, that material being detectable only in a certain predetermined
20 fashion, and that material being incorporated into the surface of the diamond when the laser radiation impinges on the diamond.

In a third aspect of the present invention, the laser
25 radiation impinging onto the surface of the diamond transforms the carbon structure of the diamond.

Excimer lasers are pulsed gas-discharge lasers. In these lasers, a gas mixture (for example, argon and fluorine)
30 is energetically charged and, upon sufficient charging, is caused to produce an intense emission of pulsed laser energy. Excimer lasers are conventionally used to produce a pulse or a plurality of pulses at wavelengths ranging from approximately 193 nm, or 0.193 μm , to about

351 nm, depending on the particular rare-gas-halide excimer produced.

Argon/fluorine excimers produce laser energy at 193 nm. For radiation at this wavelength, the depth of penetration into pure diamond is very small. While diamond is highly energy transmissive across a broad wavelength spectrum, pure diamond has particularly low transmissivity, low reflectivity and high absorption at about 193 nm, which corresponds to nearly the cutoff frequency of the crystal. For this reason, the excimer laser energy is taken up in a particularly thin surface layer which is rapidly brought to a high temperature. A thin layer of material in the range of from several nm to several μm , is in this way vaporised from the surface by each pulse, or alternatively may be partially graphitised by each pulse of the excimer laser. Vaporisation of material serves to protect the stone from overheating because of the high energy of sublimation for diamond carbon.

Diamonds are rarely "pure" crystals. Impurities in the form of nitrogen atoms substituted into the crystal structure exist in almost every stone. The cutoff frequency of a given diamond increases with increasing presence of nitrogen impurities, and may range as high as 300 nm. Therefore, while the preferred embodiment is described in terms of use of an ArF excimer laser, other lasers may be suitably employed, wherein laser energy having wavelengths ranging from under 200 nm to about 300 nm can be provided. These, include, in the ultraviolet range, krypton/fluorine excimers (248 nm), xenon/chlorine excimers (308 nm), and xenon/fluorine excimers (351 nm). The most effective laser wavelength for a given stone

will always depend on the purity of that diamond.

Thus, it will be understood the "about 193 nm" as used herein is meant to embrace a range sufficient to include
5 the cutoff frequency of any given stone, i.e., from about 190 nm to about 350 nm.

It is especially advantageous to irradiate the diamond through a mask which contains a form of the mark or
10 indicium as a cutout or other area of high transmissivity. Such masks can be mounted on or in front of the diamond. The spacing of the mask from the diamond surface is not critical because of the parallel radiation beam produced by an excimer laser, unless reduction
15 optics are also employed, in which case the position of the mask is necessarily important. Masks may also be fabricated with areas having different transmissivities to laser energy at the desired wavelength, yielding marks with areas of differentiated contrast selected from a
20 generated grey scale.

It is still more advantageous to image the mask on a surface of the diamond through optical means which passes ultra-violet radiation, e.g., sapphire, fused quartz or
25 fused silica. If the image to be produced is first reduced, a high energy density is obtained on the surface of the diamond, and therefore a lesser number of pulses or a reduced output capacity of the laser is required.

30 An arrangement similar to the foregoing briefly-described embodiment, but instead for producing an indicium or trade mark on glass spectacle lenses, is disclosed in US 4 912 298.

A method according to another embodiment of the invention involves the use of an excimer laser to infuse various detectible substances into the surface of a diamond. Where a diamond is to be marked with indicia which are invisible to the naked eye, i.e., primarily for security purposes, it is obviously more difficult to locate the mark for subsequently identity verification. Excimer laser energy can be used to "force" or infuse certain materials, such as fluorescent dyes and other inorganic compounds which fluoresce in the ultra-violet range, into the surface of the diamond crystal structure. A mark created on a diamond which has first been coated with such a dye or material will fluoresce under appropriate lighting conditions, thus making it easier to locate the mark which would otherwise ordinarily be invisible to the naked eye.

Alternatively, other detectable materials, such as conductive or magnetic substances, may also be so deposited on or into the diamond, for subsequent detection.

The invention will be further described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 shows a partially-schematic elevation of an arrangement for creating indicia on a diamond with an excimer laser;

Figure 2 shows a plan view of a mask provided with a trade mark, and

Figure 3 shows a side view of a diamond bearing an identifying mark.

Figure 1 generally illustrates an arrangement 10 for providing indicia on a diamond 15. A conventional argon/fluorine excimer laser 11 provides pulsed laser energy. Such excimer lasers are commonly available from a number of commercial sources. One such supplier is Lambda Physik Inc., which sells such lasers under the designations "LPX 100" and "LPX 200" Series. Another such supplier is Questek, Inc. which markets an excimer laser under the designation "Model 2720".

The argon/fluorine excimer laser 11 produces a laser output 12 at 193 nm wavelength having a flat-top beam profile (in horizontal cross-section) which propagates in a parallel beam path, when the laser 11 is provided with appropriate conventional resonator optics, as is known. The output beam 12 is directed to pass through a mask 23 in order to produce a beam configured to produce a specific mark, as opposed to the conventional excimer beam of generally rectangular cross-section. A portion of the laser radiation is stripped by the mask 23 and only in those regions which correspond to the form of the desired mark is the radiation of the laser allowed to pass through the mask.

After passing through the mask 23, more details of which will be described later, the beam is directed to reduction optics 24, which may be a 10:1 reduction lens suitable for use with laser energy at 193 nm, such as a lens fabricated of fused silica or sapphire. Surface lenses of any other desired demagnification value, such as 30:1, may be used as appropriate.

The reduction lens 24 serves to focus the beam to a size which is small enough so that the mark produced on the

edge or girdle 17 of the diamond does not significantly impair the value of the stone. The mark produced according to the invention is preferably so small that it is essentially invisible to the naked eye. The focused
5 beam impinges upon the surface of the diamond 15 and effects a small removal in the form of the desired mark. The low wavelength of the laser output energy enables marks of exceedingly high line resolution to be created in the described manner. Moreover, the resolution is so
10 fine that a mark may even be created on the culet of the stone. In practical terms, surface details of one μm resolution can be achieved.

Because diamond is essentially opaque to laser radiation
15 at about 193 nm wavelength, the laser energy is absorbed only at the outermost surface portion of the stone. The rapid absorption of energy causes the entire image to be formed with only one or a relatively few energy pulses, such as several or several tens of pulses. The required
20 output energy (or fluence) of the excimer laser beam may range from a few to several tens or more millijoules per square mm, with the precise energy output necessary for a given application depending on the size of mark to be produced, the degree of optical reduction of the beam,
25 and the desired depth of the mark to be created (i.e., the amount of material to be vaporised).

The diamond may be held in a single fixed position during the entire marking process, and accordingly there is no
30 need in this embodiment of the invention for a complex and expensive computer controlled X-Y table or any other expensive or complex positioning means such as those described in US 4 392 476 and 4 467 172. These prior art systems must scan the surface to be marked with

individual pulses, each creating only a minute portion of the image at any given moment.

As already stated, a small amount of material may be removed by vaporisation from the surface of the diamond. In addition, remaining portions of the diamond material may also be heated sufficiently to "graphitize" or undergo an allotropic transformation from one form of elemental carbon, i.e., diamond, to another, e.g., graphite. It is known that at sufficiently high temperatures, e.g., about 900°C, diamond will transform into graphite and the entire diamond crystal lattice will decompose. Before such decomposition occurs, however, it appears that the material may transform, or partially transform, into graphite while retaining the strength and durability of the diamond crystal lattice configuration.

It is believed that the diamond may undergo such a conversion within the crystal structure or at its surface, as it has been found that darkened or "graphitised" regions cannot be removed with conventional acid washes which would normally remove graphite from the surface of a diamond. Thus, a completely permanent mark is formed. In effect, diamond is treated as a photosensitive material by this invention.

It has been observed that graphitisation begins to occur at energy levels of about 0.2 milliJoules per square mm, measured at the mask and before any reduction optics. For a plot of surface damage versus beam energy density, it is known that this curve for diamond is theoretically a step function. Below a lower threshold value no damage occurs, while above an upper threshold no further damage is done, regardless of energy applied. In practice, it

has been observed that there is a very narrow transition zone around 0.2 milliJoules per square mm per pulse (at the mark) in which surface damage, e.g., graphitization, can be selectively controlled by carefully and minutely
5 adjusting the excimer laser energy output. By so controlling the laser, marks having different degrees of opacity, i.e., a "grey scale," can be produced.

A further advantage is the fact that the laser energy at
10 about 193 nm wavelength does not penetrate into the crystal structure. Internal heating of the crystal is thus avoided, such heating being a significant cause of diamond fracture in known diamond marking schemes employing laser energy. At least one known method
15 included an additional step of applying a coating of an energy-absorbing material, such as carbon black, to the surface of a diamond before carrying out any laser marking. The success of this known technique depended at least in part on the uniformity and density of the
20 energy-absorbing coating on the diamond surface, and this dependency is entirely eliminated by the present invention.

Permanent marks on the surface of a diamond have been
25 created according to the foregoing described embodiment of the invention. Marks in the form of the letter "Q" having dimensions 300 μm wide by 400 μm high were formed by application of from 1 to 10 pulses of an ArF excimer laser.

30 Figure 2 illustrates a mask 33 used to form a particular image on a diamond, according to the present invention. The mask is constructed of any suitable material 31 sufficiently strong to withstand the excimer laser energy

without itself vaporising, such as paper. The mask 33 includes cut-out areas 32 in the pattern of the desired mark.

5 In an alternative embodiment, the mask comprises a plate of fused quartz, fused silica or sapphire, coated with a suitably opaque and heat-resistant material, such as a photoresist. The mask may be prepared so as to have areas which are not coated with the opaque material, or
10 which are so coated only diffusely. By controlling the density of the coating on the mask on selected areas thereof, a mask having areas of different transmissivities is provided. Such a mask may advantageously be used to produce a mark having
15 predetermined areas of differentiated contrast, i.e., different grey shades, as explained above.

Figure 3 shows a diamond 40 having been marked at a particular circumferential location 43 on the girdle 42.
20 The girdle 42 customarily includes numerous small facets, such as the facet 44 shown in the enlarged view 50 of the girdle 42, any of which is suitable for discreetly-placed markings. It will be understood that the methods of the present invention are equally well applied to polished
25 and unpolished, i.e., rough finished, diamond surfaces alike. While markings may be created anywhere on a diamond, it is aesthetically preferable to create such markings only on minor facets of the stone. The present method may even be advantageously used to place a mark on
30 the culet 48 of the stone 40.

As shown in Figure 3, the laser-created indicia include a letter "H" 49 and a smaller representation of a diamond 47. As described above, these marks 46,47 may either be

of equal or differing depths and/or contrasts, even when produced at the same time by the same excimer laser pulses.

5 In an alternative embodiment of the invention, the same apparatus and process steps as just described are repeated, but the diamond is first coated at the location to be marked with a substance having special properties, such as fluorescence or phosphorescence. When a mark,
10 especially a mark which is so small that it is invisible to the naked eye, is created on a diamond, it may often be difficult to find the mark subsequently. This would undermine the value of the mark as a means for additional security in instances where the diamond must be
15 relatively quickly identified. A fluorescing mark could more easily be located and inspected, given the appropriate lighting conditions, e.g., ultraviolet, and is thus a desirable feature of a method for marking diamonds.

20 When the excimer laser energy impinges the coated surface of the stone, a significant number of molecules of the coating remain at the area of the mark and are adhered to or infused into the surface of the diamond, without
25 having been vaporised. The precise mechanism of this action is not understood at this time. Nonetheless, when materials such as zinc sulphide or dimethyl zinc in combination with gaseous sulphur compounds are employed or deposited as coating, the marks so produced by the
30 invention can be located only under lighting conditions (ultraviolet) which cause the mark to fluoresce in a preselected, extremely-narrow, frequency band, thus aiding in the prevention of unauthorised detection.

In addition, such deposition and/or alloy combining of metals or volatile metal compounds with diamond carbon, such as arsine, phosphine, iron or iron carbonyl, and nickel or nickel carbonyl, at the surface of the diamond
5 can produce magnetically-detectable indicia, i.e., diffused or decomposed metal and/or metal carbides catalyst by the laser on the indicia. Such deposition of other substances such as titanium carbide or molybdenum carbide, could produce other electrically-detectable
10 indicia. Similarly, diborane or any other gaseous or solid compound elements, could cause diffusion of substances to create electron junctions to cause a change in electrical properties, i.e., in a manner similar to doping of silicon to produce n-p-n and/or p-n-p
15 semiconductors.

Thus a range of optical, magnetic or electrical properties could be engendered.

20 It may be advantageous in some circumstances to create a series of precisely-spaced circumferential marks according to this alternative embodiment, wherein an electronically readable, unique "signature" may be defined for a stone. For example, the stone could be
25 rotated at a predetermined speed and the magnetic marks electronically detected by a fixed counter or similar device. The counter output would provide a distinctive signal pattern which could be maintained as a secret by the owner of the diamond. Given the existence of
30 sufficiently accurate measuring systems, it would be particularly difficult for a would-be thief to "forge" the correct pattern of marks on a different stone.

Such advantageous marking of diamonds is entirely novel,

and the range of uses for such marks is not completely exhausted by this brief description.

5 It is also known that diamond may be "created" by thin film chemical-vapour-deposition (CVD) techniques. It may be advantageous in certain cases to sandwich an identification mark between the natural stone and a superficial CVD layer of diamond for added security.

10 The mask 23 in Figure 1 is shown as being positioned between the laser 11 and the reduction lens 24, yet the mask 23 could also be located between the lens 24 and the diamond 15 to be marked, although the illustrated position is preferred. When the reduction lens 24 is not
15 used, the position of the mask 23 may range from just at the outlet of the laser 11 to adjacent the stone 15, without any significant effect on operation.

20 As noted above, some diamonds may be more advantageously marked according to the invention by using KrF, XeCl or XeF lasers. Alternatively, any laser source capable of delivering sufficient energy at the appropriate wavelength would suffice.

25 It is further envisioned that the invention may be readily useful and advantageous to those in the extrusion arts. More specifically, extremely-fine complex patterns may be used as masks in the production of diamond plate extrusion dies, such as for use in extruding metal wire,
30 glass fibre or synthetic fibres. By repetitively pulsing the excimer laser, thin diamond plates may be essentially "drilled", with the resulting hole section being in the form of the mask, after reduction.

This would permit creation of fabrics having new and as yet unappreciated qualities. For example, fibres having very-high nap could be produced and then woven into new materials having applications such as filters, substrates
5 or insulators. Almost any cross-section could be obtained for an extruded material, at extremely high resolution or surface features.

Moreover, the die could be "drilled" in the direction of
10 greatest strength of the diamond. Particularly strong and durable dies are thus obtainable by the present invention.

CLAIMS

1. A method of producing a mark on a diamond, the method comprising the steps:
5 positioning a mask between an outlet of an excimer laser and a portion of a surface of the diamond to be marked, and
directly irradiating the portion of the surface of the diamond with the excimer laser through the mask
10 so as to permit the radiation of the excimer laser itself to create the mark in a pattern defined by the mask.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein the excimer
15 laser irradiates the diamond with at least one energy pulse at a wavelength of about 193 nm.
3. A method according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the
20 irradiating step includes passing the excimer laser radiation through areas of different transmissivities in the mask.
4. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein
25 the mask is spaced from the surface of the diamond.
5. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein
the mask is imaged on to the surface of the diamond at a reduced size through means for optically
30 reducing the mask pattern.
6. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein
the mask is made of paper.
7. A method according to claim 4, wherein the mask is

made of material which is substantially transmissive at the wavelength of the excimer wavelength radiation.

- 5 8. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein the energy of the excimer laser is adjusted to remove only a thin layer from part of the surface of the diamond.
- 10 9. A method according to claim 8, wherein the layer removed from the surface has a thickness ranging from several nm to several μm .
- 15 10. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein the mark is created whilst holding the diamond in a single fixed position.
- 20 11. A method according to any preceding claim, including the step, before irradiating the diamond, of applying a coating of material to the surface to be marked, which material is detectable only under predetermined lighting conditions.
- 25 12. A method according to claim 11, wherein the material is a fluorescent material.
13. A method according to claim 11, wherein the material is a phosphorescent material.
- 30 14. A method according to claim 1, including the step, before irradiating the diamond, of applying a coating of material to the surface to be marked, which material is optically, electronically or magnetically detectable.

15. A method according to claim 14, wherein the material is molybdenum carbide, nickel carbide, titanium carbide or iron carbide.
- 5 16. A method according to claim 14, including the further step of similarly directly irradiating at least a second portion of the diamond to form at least a second mark.
- 10 17. A method according to any preceding claim, wherein the output energy of the excimer laser is adjusted to transform partially the diamond from one form of elemental carbon to another.
- 15 18. A method according to claim 17, wherein the energy of the excimer laser is adjusted to graphitize the diamond partially at the area to be marked.
- 20 19. A method according to claim 18, wherein the darkness of the mark so produced varies with the degree of graphitisation caused by the excimer laser radiation.
- 25 20. A diamond having on it at least one mark made by a method as claimed in any preceding claim.

- 20 -

Patents Act 1977
Examiner's report to the Comptroller under
Section 17 (The Search Report)

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Relevant Technical fields

(i) UK CI (Edition K) B3V

(ii) Int CI (Edition 5) B23K

Databases (see over)

(i) UK Patent Office

(ii)

Search Examiner

D N P BUTTERS

Date of Search

9 DECEMBER 1991

Documents considered relevant following a search in respect of claims

ALL

Category (see over)	Identity of document and relevant passages	Relevant to claim(s)
	NONE	

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Category	Identity of document and relevant passages -21-	Relevant to claim(s)

Categories of documents

X: Document indicating lack of novelty or of inventive step.

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